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SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

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TAGS: PREL PHUM KIRF VM VT

SUBJECT: VIETNAM WARMING TO RELATIONS WITH HOLY SEE?

REF: 04 Vatican 1988

1.(U) Italian news agency ANSA reported January 12 that Vietnam may be considering establishing diplomatic relations with the Holy See. In the wake of Italian Parliamentary Speaker (Chamber of Deputies President) Pier Ferdinando Casini's visit to Vietnam and his meeting with President Luong and First DPM Dung, ANSA reported that Vietnamese state television broadcast comments indicating the GOVN's openness to establishing a diplomatic relationship with the Vatican. The report cited comments from government officials that relations were just "a matter of time." Casini had reportedly raised the issue during his meeting.

2.(SBU) Holy See FM Country Director for Vietnam Monsignor Luis Montemayor told Poloff January 14 that he had not yet seen the official report on what was actually said in Casini's meeting with the GOVN, so he was not yet sure what to make of the development. He was not overly optimistic, however, and indicated that the Vatican would see if the annual visit of a Holy See delegation to Vietnam, tentatively scheduled for April, would generate any new directions. The government of Italy's interest in the matter "is part of the friendly cooperation in matters of common interest" between the Vatican and Italy, Montemayor explained. Indeed, Italians officials often make approaches on behalf of the Holy See when dealing with countries that have strained ties or no diplomatic relations with the Vatican.

3.(SBU) Comment: Last April's visit to Vietnam by Vatican officials left the Holy See feeling satisfied that they had made modest progress in certain areas such as the provision of social services to local governments by religious workers (reftel). Reports also indicate that there has been some progress on the selection of bishops, and the training and ordination of seminarians. Nevertheless, the Church still faces restrictions and hopes to see additional positive signs in the months ahead. If it does, the Year of the Rooster could auger well for progress towards more formal relations between Vietnam and the Vatican. The Holy See is maintaining a healthy skepticism, however, as optimistic indications have often failed to bring concrete progress.

Nicholson

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